

FOREST COVER¹

By EDNA BRYNER

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THE ribbon of road wound down through the forest. A woman followed it. The road seemed to come from the town of a thousand souls but it only came through there, just as it came through forest on the other side of the town, and through another town on the other side of the forest, and through forest again on the other side of that town. The woman followed the road just that way. At some time or other she had stepped out upon it from some place through which it came and ever since she had been following it. Somewhere she would stop following it, she would make an end of it. The road itself would go on, ceaselessly, in and out of forest, through towns and again through forest.

As the woman walked, a sharp, long needle of words, "No one must ever know," drove itself in and out of her brain. The words made a thin pattern that spread out sprawlingly to form a lid, like the pan of some cunning trap, which shut down automatically over every projection of thought that tried to make of her an articulate being, conscious of her own exigency. At the same time, something of her beyond the reach of words, finely hidden away from all snares, escaped like a thin cloud and entered the forest, crept along the dark leaf-mold earth, over the mossed rocks, up the dark, strong trunks of trees, out to the tips of the branches, to the edges of the leaves, swaying there until by its own motion it was dissipated—and again she was a woman walking along a piece of road.

The woman was in a daze with her following of the road.

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When she bent her head down and stared upon its yellow dirt surface, she was one with it, a piece of itself walking upon it. When she lifted up her head, she was separate from it, a living thing walking upon a piece of dead earth. Then she looked upon the wall of forest to right and left and became aware that the trees were intimate with the earth. She felt heavily their greater intimacy with the earth.

This intimacy bothered her. The forest came up out of the earth in trunks swelling into branches that burst into leaves. The earth was proud of this, proud of the roots that bored into it and sucked at it, at the trunks that went up, swelling into branches, a network between it and the sky, mesh to sift sunshine through. The trees were proud, too, proud of the earth that lay quiet and heavy with nourishment under them, receiving their roots, feeding them. The deep, unfathomable intimacy made them proud. They were joined in understanding, one. Their oneness bothered the woman. At the same time she felt strangely protected by it. She walked quietly and firmly, not fast, as she did in the towns. In the towns she hurried through, looking at no one, eager to get into the safety of the woods, eager almost to be in the bother of the oneness of earth and trees.

There were times when she wanted to stop, to leave the road, go up the side of the forest-clothed mountain and lie down; but she did not dare. Something within her urged her on. The Something was her Sin. Her Sin made her put one unwilling foot before the other and follow the winding strip of dirt road.

It was her Sin that set her out upon the road. Through long months she had kept it secret, hidden quite from knowing eyes. She kept it secret, shutting out admission that the hour of its triumph would come. She had hoped to kill it, had encased it in prison bars, ruthless, holding herself impervious to the pain of the hurt that wrenched her with the hurting of the thing secret within her. She had tried to starve it, suffering in silence from the lack that she caused herself in withholding food from it. But her Sin lived. It was alive and strong. The day came

when its strength moved terribly within her and that set her feet upon the road. While she walked, it was quiet, sleeping like a child carried in its mother's arms. When she sat down to rest, it moved and urged her on, on down the narrow road winding through the forest around the side of the low mountain.

Many turnings and windings the road had. By and by it would come to a swift creek, with a bridge set across, and a mill beside it, and there would be human habitations, imitations of houses, rough hemlock shells, with people carrying on an imitation of living, going through motions that made time slip by. The woman knew all this well. The road had taught her as she came. At some such place her Sin would have its hour of triumph.

There must be an end soon. She stopped to drink at a little spring under a jutting bank. Her Sin grew angry, threatened her. She straightened up and went on rounding the turn. A heavy team dragging its load of deftly packed shingles came up the flank of the mountain, its driver walking slowly beside. The brawny blue-shirted lumberman did not speak but drew the horses aside to let good footing be for the woman and his eyes looked with friendly respect upon the neat young figure in the gray print dress.

The woman felt the look penetrating deep, into a place thin and clear, a place that existed long before her Sin came upon her. She bent her head and moved quickly past, down the long slope of the road toward the swift creek.

A rough shack set high on the bank above the big mill dam came into view. Would this be the place? Her Sin gave no sign. Now that she was in motion it lay quiescent, pacified. She stood still in the road. Her wide, gray eyes rested in appraisement on the house. A dirty old woman smoking a corn-cob pipe slouched around the corner from the back. On her wrinkled face greedy curiosity showed itself. She took her pipe out of her mouth and started to speak.

The woman of the road began walking again very fast. She went down across the bridge and past the mill from

which came forth the rhythmical high hungry whine of the saw cutting virgin timber, the slap-thwack of boards thrown from one receiver to another.

The road was going up again past a house set high to the left, a large house with an air of well-being. Perhaps here? She went up the steps from the road, walked the single board path to the porch, knocked against the casing of the open door. From an inner room a woman came, in a blue wrapper, young and blowsy, with red eyes, holding a sleeping baby to her breast.

"Will you give me a drink?"

"Yes. It's hot today, ain't it? Come right in. You must be tuckered out walking in the sun." Voluble, she led the way to the back porch. "There it is in the big tin pail. Wait a minute. I'll git you a glass." She fetched a heavy tumbler from the kitchen shelf. "It's prob'ly warm. I can't git water many times with this baby to look after. He cries every time I put him down. It's all I kin do to git the men's meals. They's two from the mill besides my husband."

There was no place here for her. The woman drank the water hastily. "I'm much obliged." She turned back through the house. "I'll be going on." She was on the porch.

"Better set a minute. Needn't be hurryin' off so quick." There was slight resentment in the tone.

The woman was on the walk. "I have to be going. I'm much obliged." She went down the steep steps into the road.

She followed the road doggedly. A little house to the left, door and windows shut. She went up and peered in. It was empty. Here? She looked around fearful. Her Sin gave a great lurch within her. She shuddered. She could not be alone with it here.

She went out into the road again and toiled on up the curve, crossed the slide where the logs came shooting down, moved slowly up the straight, nearly level piece. More buildings came into view, to the right a large rough barn, to the left a watering trough and a long picket fence fronting a cleared space with a big hemlock house set in the

middle and a spring-house a stone's throw away. Farther ahead to the right a little shack squatted on the flat side of the road and near it a woman's figure in bright blue was tying a bony horse to a stake.

The woman walked past the watering trough and approached the figure. She saw a stringy woman in a tight blue sateen dress, face the color of old leather, a great bang of hair falling down into faded blue, piglike eyes, a little knot of hair in the back twisting tightly away from the cordy neck. A frowsy child came out of the shack. "Ma, ma," it cried like a little animal. A wailing arose from within the house, a sound of violent rocking. "Not here," said the woman in a cold fear to herself.

"Will you give me a drink?" Automatically the words came.

"I sure will. We got the best drinkin' water anywheres around. Liz!" she shouted into the house. An ungainly elder girl appeared in the dark hole of the doorway. "Git some fresh water from the spring!"

The girl stood sullen a moment, then disappeared. She came out with a small tin pail dangling against her dirty legs.

"Git a move on you. Seems like I can't make her do a thing."

Sullen, the girl moved across the road, swung open a gate, and took the path to the spring-house.

"Who lives there?" asked the woman. Hope burned low in her.

"That's Bennet's. He's the lumber boss. He don't take no boarders neither. They got too many children for that, five boys an' two girls, an' Mrs. Bennet's pertickiler. I allays scrub the floors for her. See this dress? I saved the money she give me an' got it last week come Sataday."

A great despair came over the woman. She made a couple of steps forward.

"Where air you goin'? Air you all alone?"

Anything to put an end to questioning. She spoke at random, strangely in accord with the custom of the forest dwellers. "My husband's coming along behind with our goods. We're moving."

"Oh, movin'? What's your husband do? Gonno work in the mill or in the woods?"

"He's going into the mill."

"You ain't gonno walk all the way to Goff's, air you?"

The woman felt fright. "How far is it?" Her Sin was threatening her again.

"Must be a matter of five miles."

"Is that the nearest mill?" She could never walk that far.

"By the road 'tis. If you cut through the woods you kin git to Fox's mill down the path back of Bennet's barn, but that mill's shet down. You kin cut up back of their house an' git to Sumner's. That's a mile or so an' a good path. Mrs. Sumner, now, she comes over to see Mrs. Bennet an' brings Gertrude. She ain't tied down like the rest of us. She ain't but the one, an' a good little girl, too. Not like my good-fer-nothin' Liz."

Hope suddenly leaped high, a sense of surety crowned its leaping. "And the path to her place is back of the house over there?"

"Yes. Walk right past the spring an' cut up over the hill, an' there's a path." The woman started to go. "But I thought you was goin' to Goff's? An' your husband?" Suspicion came into the lines of the leathery face.

"I must have misspoken myself." The woman kept her head turned toward Bennet's. Her voice was calm. She had a slight wonder at her calmness while her mind searched out through the forest back of Bennet's. "I came the wrong way, I guess. It was Sumner's I wanted."

"But you said your husband—"

"He isn't coming for a few days." She spoke with decision. It was easy to say anything, anything that any one wanted her to say. "I came on first to kind of look around and it was Sumner's I wanted but I forgot the name."

"Well, it's a good thing you found me. You'd been to Goff's not knowin' no better." She laughed a hoarse chuckle.

The woman said, "Yes, I'm glad I found you. Now I know how to go."

"But you ain't had your drink. Liz!" the raucous voice

screamed. "Fetch that water or I'll tan your hide good!"

"Never mind, I'll get a drink as I go past. I'm much obliged to you." The woman crossed quickly over the road, took the path past the spring, not stopping to drink, cut up back of Bennet's, and was swallowed up in the forest before the figure in blue had recovered from surprise.

She was surrounded by forest, by trees growing out of earth. She was full of pain. Her head was a ball of fire and her body a world of pain. Roots were twining in her trying to get a foothold, roots were sucking away at her vitals trying to extract nourishment. She was earth and she could not lie down, for she had a Sin that kept urging her on.

Blindly she followed the pathway. The pathway led to Sumner's where there was a woman who had time to visit and a little girl who was good. If Sumner's was not the place, there was only the forest. She was in forest now but she was on a path that divided forest. Forest on both sides of her, trees and earth in a great swelling together and the sky smiling through the network of branches and leaves. She went on. She went quickly. Roots caught at her feet. The smart of branches fell on her face. Her Sin clamored for its hour.

She ran, she could not see, her feet kept the path like a miracle. Suddenly the path gave out on a road. Across the road was a house. She felt that there was a house, she did not see it. She made her last effort against the Sin that was tearing her to pieces, taking at last its deep revenge. She fell toward the blur that she felt was the house. She gave way at last to the strength of her Sin. . . .

The woman awoke. She was lying in bed in a ceiled room whose windows looked out on low branches of hemlock. There was a patchwork quilt on the bed. She felt light, light and drowsy. She slept. Again she awoke. She felt light, light and her head was clear. Her Sin? It had triumphed. She felt like laughing. Her Sin had triumphed, yet she felt light, light and quite clear. She stirred. A large, motherly form appeared, an anxious face bent over her. "I'll lift it up and you can see it."

The woman looked upon it. It was her Sin. She had lost her Sin. But here it was beside her still. Would it never leave her? She stared hard at it. Yes, it was her Sin. She closed her eyes to shut out its sight.

"I'll put it right beside you where it'll keep warm. It's so tiny, we must take good care of it."

The little bundle lay beside her. She could put her hand upon it, pick it up. Her Sin was outside of her now. Everyone could see it. A Sin should be hidden, kept secret, covered over. . . .

She dozed. She was walking along a road. The road went on and on, hard, smooth, implacable, hard and hurting under her soft feet. The wall of the forest rose up on both sides and mocked her. The wall to the right bowed in derision. The trees leaned over and swept their branches on the road in front of her. The wall to the left bowed in derision and swept its branches before her. "Come this way," one said. "Come this way," said the other. They swept their branches in front of her making it difficult for her to walk.

She tried to placate them. She bowed first to the one wall and then to the other. As she bowed, the one wall said in a great voice as though all its trees were many-forked tongues demanding together, "Speak!" and as she bowed again, the other wall said in a great voice of many tongues, "Speak!" They settled their trunks stiffly across her way like dark crossed swords and waited for her to begin.

She saw now that they were full of eyes, terrible accusing eyes, an eye on every leaf, thousands of eyes. "If I could change their eyes to ears," she thought, "then I could tell them." She became clever. She shut her own eyes so that they could not see her. No sooner had she done so than she remembered that this was a game she had played with Him when she was a little girl. She stood in the corner with closed eyes and said, "Now you can't see me." He hunted from corner to corner until he stumbled upon her. Then she opened her eyes and he shouted, "Now I see you!" She knew all the time really that he saw her. So she knew now that the thousands of eyes saw

her and there was no use trying to play a silly game with them.

"Perhaps he will be here now if I open my eyes," she thought, "and he will tell them." Dismay swept over her. "But how can he? I never told him. How could he know if I did not tell him?"

She opened her eyes and looked upon the walls of forest. They were waiting for her to speak, unsettling themselves uneasily. The eyes began to move back and forth and as they moved they read words out of her through her own voice: "His mother never would have forgiven me. She wouldn't have believed he did it. She'd have thought I made him do it."

The words seemed weak, thin, a flimsy covering for something that lay underneath. The trunks of the trees rubbed against one another, complaining at her words. The eyes glowered upon her, piercing into her. "They want to know everything," she thought desperately, "everything, from the beginning." She addressed them as though they had commanded her. "But that would take too long, all of it, the whole thing."

The forest ruffled itself still more uneasily and murmured against her. The eyes became sinister. In fear, she spoke: "His mother took me in when I was little, from the city, nobody's. She brought me up to be his sister. She called me daughter, gave me things."

The forest began sweeping its branches in front of her. "It doesn't believe me," she thought in terror. "It won't let me pass, ever." She began to cry. "He might have hated me if I told him. He might have hated me." The branches swept in front of her. She could not see the road. It was covered with sweeping branches. . . .

She awoke. Her face was wet, quite wet, as though she had been in the water. Her hand lay on the bundle that held her Sin. She became wide awake, alert. She felt cunning arise within her. She stirred in bed. No one came. Sin should be covered. Her hand was on the patchwork quilt, grasped it, drew it up over the bundle of Sin, held it close. Her hand unclosed after a while, dragged the quilt back a little. She lay still. Her eyes slept. . . .

Some one came in, over to the bed, leaned over, jerked the quilt away. The bundle was taken up. At last they were taking her Sin away. They had left it too long beside her. She felt herself looked steadily upon. She opened her eyes. "Did you—have you been awake since I left the room?" The motherly voice was stern, suspicious, reluctant, too.

"I was asleep."

"I fixed the quilt carefully before I left. It was over the baby's face when I came back."

Why did they trouble her about a baby? It was her Sin she had covered up so that no one could see it. "The quilt," she whispered painfully. "I pulled the quilt up. I was cold." She settled down in bed.

A breeze, soft and full of the resinous breath of hemlock came through the slightly opened window and blew her eyelids down. Leaves began piling upon her in layers, soft and pressing, trying to smother her.

The dream began again. She was walking on a road through the forest. The road was narrow, oh, so narrow, she could hardly keep on it, narrow, and hard and smooth like glass. The wall of forest to the right kept bowing, the trees swept down, their branches lashed her. The wall of forest to the left kept bowing, its branches lashed her. The branches were full of eyes, eyes that burned when the branches lashed.

The eyes *knew*. "I must tell them the whole truth," she said to herself, but she knew that she said it aloud and that the forest heard it. "Huah! Huah!" The wind swept through the branches. "The truth! The truth!" The wind blew the words through the branches. A tall strong tree with great bulging eyes swept down upon her. "I wanted him!" she screamed.

The trees stopped lashing. The eyes became ears. She knelt before them feeling their compassion. "I tried not to, at first—but when he touched me, I wanted him. He spoke words of poetry, words that he knew out of a book he brought back with him from his travel. 'Your gray eyes are like pools. I lose myself in them.' He took the pins from my hair. 'Your hair is a mesh. I am caught

in it. I cannot escape.' He held me to him. 'Your body is softer than this milkweed down. Shall I float away with it?' He had never spoken that way before. His mother wouldn't have believed that he talked that way."

Now that the forest was compassionate, her mind unloosed itself all at once in a great rush of hurrying thoughts that went out like waves into the leafage, communicating her secret without the tedious use of words. "I had no right to him. His mother meant us always to be brother and sister—to keep us apart. She didn't really think I was as good as he. She only took me because his father wanted me. She didn't know what his father said, once, when he teased me: 'I chose you because you were the prettiest of all the children. Your gray eyes asked me to take you, and so I had to. You were a little fairy without any father or mother.' She would have given him up some day to some one else. But I wanted him. I needed him. She would never forgive me if she knew. I never told anyone, not even him. He would have married me. His father would have made him marry me. But I kept away from him, after I knew. And he—"

"And he, and he," whistled the trees. The sky became dark, the wind came in a gale, the branches crashed together and began lashing her. Despair overwhelmed her. "Now I shall be destroyed. They were only trapping me." She submitted herself to annihilation. The branches lashed her, lashed her clothes away, lashed into her flesh. . . .

"Poor thing! She didn't know what she was doing. I thought at first she had done it on purpose. She doesn't seem to know she's had a baby." She lay and listened with closed eyes. She felt she was lying in a pool of water that softened her flesh, took life away from her. "It looks real pretty in that little dress of Gertrude's. I always felt I'd have use for those baby clothes some day, but I didn't think it would be like this."

They brought it for her to see. She looked upon it dry-eyed. She knew that they wanted her to cry. Foolish people! Why should one cry for a Sin once it is dead?

She was sitting up. . . . She could walk a little. . . . She dressed herself and came out on the porch. They were

kind. They never asked her anything. She knew they hoped she would tell them. The husband spoke clumsily to her. They were sorry—could they help her? She shook her head.

Early in the morning she awoke. She felt quite clear. She must be on the road. She dressed hastily, quietly, was out of the house. The road led her. She walked fast, following it through the forest. She did not know where she went. She simply went on. By and by she would come out of the forest and there would be a town and there she would step off the road.

She walked quickly, she felt so light. She was light for her Sin was gone. She walked quickly for a long time. She became tired. She sat down to rest. Nothing within her urged her on. There was a great emptiness within her, a consuming emptiness. She felt how heavy her breasts were and how great her emptiness was. She wanted to go up in the forest and lie down. She did not dare. The forest and earth seemed allied against her, trees and earth together, their oneness held her out.

She had a desire that the roots of the trees should take hold on her, disintegrate her, find a place for their support and nourishment. A great and horrible yearning took hold on her. She yearned that her emptiness should be filled, she yearned for her Sin, for the bundle that held her Sin, she yearned to nourish her Sin. . . .

She threw herself in the dust of the road and sobbed. The forest repudiated her. The wall of the forest pushed her into the road. She was one with the road. Nothing grew out of her; she nourished nothing. She was a way, to be passed over, trampled upon. . . .

She felt the throbbing ache of her breasts in the dust. She arose and stood quiet, looking sombrely at the dark, unrelenting wall of forest. Then she walked slowly along. Sadly, drearily, the life that lay behind her, the life that she had shut out from her when her feet first set out upon the road, began to filter back into her bruised mind. It came as something she had known long ago, so long that it seemed as though it must have been quite another life, and she another person, a young dreaming girl, moving

about in the big white house set on the great planted space up against the forest, learning from a shadowy placid woman who called her daughter the ways of the little world of which she was a part, teased by a shadowy kindly man when the woman was not there to hear, captured by the shadowy grown-up figure of the little boy who had played games with her, come back from school and travel a mysterious young man. . . .

How far away it was, how far and how long, long ago! Slowly, slowly, she walked along the road through the forest, carrying in her the dream fragments of her shattered world. Soon she would come out of the forest and there would be a town and there she would step off the road. She would leave the road that went on ceaselessly, in and out of forest, through towns, and again through forest.